



CHILDREN'S LITERATURE & GENDER DISCRIMINATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper intends to analyze stereotype construction of gender roles in the text of children's stories which inculcate in the children's crude minds socially developed gender differences. The manner in which Genders are represented in children's literature impacts children's attitudes and perceptions of Gender-appropriate behavior in society. Sexism in literature can be so insidious that it quietly conditions boys and girls to accept the way they 'see and read the world,' thus reinforcing gender images. This reinforcement predisposes children to not question existing social relationships. At the same time, however, books containing images that conflict with gender stereotypes provide children the opportunity to re-examine their gender beliefs and assumptions. Thus, texts can provide children with alternative role models and inspire them to adopt more egalitarian gender attitudes. This Paper would be beneficial in drawing the attention of authors, editors and writers of children's literature to redefine gender roles in order to minimize gender differences.

INTRODUCTION:

Besides being an important resource for developing children's language skills, children's books play a significant part in transmitting a society's culture to children & Gender roles are an important part of this culture. In recent decades, extensive studies from diverse disciplines have focused on children's developmental awareness of different gender roles and the relationships between genders. Among these studies, researchers agree that children's picture books have an increasingly significant place in children's development because these books are a widely available cultural resource, offering young children a multitude of opportunities to gain information, become familiar with the printed pictures, be entertained, and experience perspectives other than their own. In such books, males are habitually described as active and domineering, while females rarely reveal their identities and very frequently are represented as meek and mild. This valuable venue for children's gender development thus unfortunately reflects engrained societal attitudes and biases in the available choices and expectations assigned to different genders. This discriminatory portrayal in many children's picture books also runs the risk of leading children toward a misrepresented and misguided realization of their true potential in their expanding world. This paper will inspire the readers to conduct further researches related to the topic. Moreover, it will also facilitate future researches.

GENDER BIAS IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE:

Weitzman, Eifler, Hokada, and Ross (1972) were among the first researchers to note a greater emphasis on male characters in children's literature although Numerous studies analyzing children's literature find the majority of books dominated by male figures. For example,

- Moreover, children's literature and readers contain words, pictures, and descriptions that indicate that it is more desirable to be male than it is to be female (Davis, 1984; Jacklin & Mischel, 1973)
- An examination of 113 recently published books for children found that dependency themes which emphasize helpless behavior for females continue to be commonly used (White, 1986).
- Many classics and popular stories where girls are portrayed usually reflect stereotypes of masculine and feminine roles. Such gender stereotypes are prevalent not only in mainstream children's books but also in Newbery and Caldecott medal winners. Children's books frequently portray girls as acted upon rather than active (Fox, 1993).
- The development of gender-role identity is important to children's self-perception, and influences adults' and peers' treatment of children (Kortenhaus & Demarest, 1993).
- Girls are represented as sweet, naive, conforming, and dependent, while boys are typically described as strong, adventurous, independent, and capable (Ernst, 1995; Jett-Simpson & Masland, 1993).
- Boys tend to have roles as fighters, adventurers and rescuers, while girls in their passive role tend to be caretakers, mothers, princesses in need of rescuing, and characters that support the male figure (Temple, 1993).
- Often, girl characters achieve their goals because others help them,

whereas boys do so because they demonstrate ingenuity and/or perseverance. If females are initially represented as active and assertive, they are often portrayed in a passive light toward the end of the story. Girl characters who retain their active qualities are clearly the exception (Rudman, 1995).

- Gender stereotypes in literature prevent female human potential from being realized by depriving girls of a range of strong, alternative role models. (Turner-Bowker, 1996).
- The characters and situations in books introduce children to what the world may look like through others eyes, and offer opportunities for children to further construct their own views of self and the world. Strictly speaking, everything that children read contributes to the formation of self-images that help to construct children's self-identity. For example, girls can imagine themselves as women and boys can imagine themselves as men (Singh, 1998).
- Gender bias as portrayed in children's literature is still as prevalent today as in past decades, and remains a problem in light of the fact that gender stereotypes and sexism in children's picture books affect the development of gender identity in young children (Allen, Allen, & Sigler, 1993; Trepanier-Street & Roma-towski, 1999).
- Children's literature is said to provide characters and events with which children can identify and through which they can consider their own actions, beliefs, and emotions (Mendoza & Reese, 2001).
- Images and specific language used in picture books have the potential to affect children's developmental processes in various ways as a result of reading at crucial stages of development (Kramer, 2001).
- Children's books are an important cultural mechanism for teaching gender roles to children (Taylor, 2003).
- Male dominance can be found in books in which the characters are animals, and that even the types of animals used to represent characters also vary according to gender: mice are most often used to represent female characters and bears are most often used to represent male characters. (Tsao 2008)
- One thing that surprised us is that females' representations did not consistently improve from 1900 to 2000; in the mid part of the century it was actually more unequal. Books became more male-dominated. (McGrabe, Fairchild, Grauerholz, Pescosolido, and Tope, 2011)
- Storybooks help children understand the roles of men and women in a society. And if certain ideas are reinforced or challenged about what is typically appropriate for the genders, then the children will be better equipped to identify and even reject hurtful notions. The study also found that kids as young as age three are able to absorb stereotypes and gender roles. Traditionally society confines women to typical gender roles of domestic worker or primary caregiver to children. These roles are represented as illustrations in many books in India and around the

world. If left unchallenged, they can enforce stereotypes in a child's mind. (US National Institute of Health, 2013)

- Children literature is an important source of entertainment and learning for them. Unfortunately, we are providing them literature which has been infused in their mind socially made gender identities. For this reason these stereotype identities have become part and parcel of our society. Such gender roles should be reconstructed for their positive character building and to nourish a healthy society. (Iqra jabeen & Asad mahmood, 2014)
- Gender bias is present in the content, language, and illustrations of many children's books (Brower, 2016; Heinsz, 2013; Kittelberger, 2002; Trepanier-Street & Romatowski, 1999).
- Heike Wrenn claims in his article, "The Woman in Modernism" that "for centuries, women were defined by men; the world was male-centered and male-dominated," which is reflected in the traditional literature (9). Most of the traditional literature was written mainly by men from men's point of view, such as Panchatantra written by Vishnu Sharma, Hitopdesha by Narayan Pandit, Katha Sarit Sagara by Somdeva, to name a few. Most of these stories are dominated by male-oriented themes, characters and views. Women have almost negligible or negative representation in many of these texts for children.
- Former Secretary General of IBBY (International Board on Books for Young People) India, Manorama Jafa brings up the following observations: The present day children's literature in India in all languages continues to draw largely on the traditional literature... The value system that dominated the themes was oriented to the upper class, contemptuous of women other than the traditional roles like mother, wife and daughter. The male-oriented stories with adult themes dominated the theme. Child's perspective is totally missing ("Children's Literature in India", 34).

Thus, studies indicate that not only are girls portrayed less often than boys in children's books, but both genders are frequently presented in stereotypical terms as well.

IMPORTANCE & NEED OF GENDER-REPRESENTATION IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE:

Just like all the other values you teach children-honesty, compassion, kindness-gender equality is as important an issue they need to be taught from an early age to grow up to be responsible beings. This means you steer clear of restricting your child to definite gender roles or stereotypes to begin with. To ask a child to walk and talk "like a girl" or not play with dolls as a boy is to systematically repress their choices, instincts and identity. Through folk and contemporary stories, myths and legends, fiction, non-fiction and poetry, our books give children images of a pluralistic, diverse, multilingual world. Oral folk genres like songs, stories, proverbs and riddles and the arts and crafts that pervade every aspect of life, create verbal and non-verbal environments that shape childhood experiences. Many researchers and authors argue that readers identify with characters of their own gender in books. Therefore, the relative lack of girl characters in texts can limit the opportunity for girls to identify with their gender and to validate their place in society. Gender stereotypical roles are constraining to both genders. Just as girls are trapped in passive and whiny roles, boys and men are rarely described as people demonstrating emotions of sadness and fear, having hobbies/occupations that are not stereotypically male and in roles where they aren't competing or meeting high expectations. These stereotypes limit boys' and girls' freedom to express themselves and pressure them to behave in ways that are 'gender appropriate' rather than ways best suited to their personality.

In the Context of India, Traditionally society confines women to typical gender roles of domestic worker or primary caregiver to children. These roles are represented as illustrations in many books in India and around the world. If left unchallenged, they can enforce stereotypes in a child's mind. According to a 2015 McKinsey Global Institute report on gender inequality in India, women perform nearly 10 times the unpaid care work as men. That's almost three times the global average difference. Housework accounts for 85% of the time women in India spend on unpaid care work, a separate, 2018 report found. This burden is still shared by young girls more than boys in the country.

Bijal Vachharajani, senior editor of Pratham Books, a publishing house, spoke to Asia Times about how a reading of *How Do Airplanes Fly?* brought her team to an important realization. "The book talked about the first woman in India to fly planes. We spoke to a few girls and their biggest takeaway was the fact that women can also fly planes! What it demonstrated to us was that books have multi-dimensional impact on children's minds."

Author Sowmya Rajendran is a recipient of Sahitya Akademi's Bal Sahitya Award, a major literary honor annually conferred on writers of the most outstanding children's books published. She, said, "Girl children are brought up with the idea of a husband looming in the horizon. But I want them to demand more and have bigger dreams that go beyond meeting 'Prince Charming'. I want them to

believe that they can be the champions, and not the second best."

"More and more children's books today are telling contemporary, relevant stories, which they can identify with. Our literary fathers are gardening, cooking, doing laundry, and our mothers are reading newspapers or enjoying a cup of hot tea," she said. Children are open to a lot of influences. Lack of enough conversations around female athletes or women's sports teams can hinder sport participation among girl students, especially. Gender stereotypes discourage girls from participating in physical activities and sports. Reports have revealed that 40% of women in the sports industry experience gender discrimination and stereotypes. It becomes important to portray strong, ambitious and athletic women characters in storybooks

Gender is perhaps the basic dimension through which children perceive their social world and their places in it. Gender shapes social organization, influences how young children interact with each other, and even determines how young children evaluate themselves. Over the past decades, increased female representation in titles, central roles, and pictures appears to indicate that more and more authors of children's books are aware of and sensitive to women's changing roles.

CONCLUSION & SUGGESTIONS:

As mentioned earlier, some conclusions can be drawn. First Gender shapes social organization, influences how young children interact with each other, and even determines how young children evaluate themselves and gender development is a critical part of the earliest and most important learning experiences. For young children, picture books are important because they provide role models for children in defining standards for feminine and masculine behavior. Next, gender stereotypes and sexism limit children's potential growth and development. Non-sexism books, on the other hand, produce positive changes in self-concept, attitudes, and behavior. In other words, children's gender attitudes may be positively changed through the reading of appropriate children's literature and other book-related activities.

Trepanier-Street and Roma-towski suggested that a valuable resource for influencing children's gender attitudes is the careful selection of reading material and the use of books and related activities that promote gender-neutral attitudes. Conventionally placed females in passive observer roles, while males have been pictured as active. Illustrations confirm the subordinate, less valued role of the female and stress the active, adventuresome, and admirable role of the male. When a female is permitted to retain active qualities, the message conveyed to children is that she is the notable exception because all other girls in books are "normal,"

In order to build a gender-equal literature learning environment, it is important to consider the attitudes of both authors and teachers when selecting children's books. Ideally, all children's books used in classrooms should have well-rounded male and female characters. That is to say, teachers should select books in which individuals have distinct personalities regardless of their genders. Characters achievements should not be evaluated on the basis of gender, and females should not always be portrayed as weaker and more delicate than males. In addition, teachers may choose books that have counter-sexist attitudes embedded in them. For example, feminist texts can help children recognize gender-stereotypical messages. Also, combining traditional and non-traditional books can spark discussion of how genders are portrayed in different books that promote gender-neutral attitudes.

Teachers need to make a conscious effort to select books that reflect fairness to both genders. Since young children can-not yet make this choice, the responsibility must be the adults'. Moreover, increased effort is needed from publishers and authors to provide children with literature that more closely parallels the roles of males and females in contemporary society.

One recommendation is to look actively for books portraying girls/women in a positive light with active, dynamic roles. Another suggestion is to look for books and stories that do not portray either gender in a stereotypical manner. Rudman (1995) recommends gender-neutral books where:

- individuals are portrayed with distinctive personalities irrespective of their gender
- achievements are not evaluated on the basis of gender
- occupations are represented as gender-free
- clothing is described in functional rather than gender-based terms
- females are not always weaker and more delicate than males
- individuals are logical or emotional depending upon the situation
- the language used in the text is gender-free, etc.

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